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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and discusses four critical issues facing the foreign language profession. The pacing of basic foreign language instruction is too rapid, causing numerous detrimental effects on learning. Recent interest in specialized aspects of instruction, such as individualization, has resulted in unfocused leadership, so that teachers are confused and unsure as to what they are supposed to be doing. There is also some confusion as to what good language teaching is. Finally, there is an excess of foreign language professional organizations, which tend to divide the financial and human resources of foreign language teachers. (Author/AM)

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CRITICAL ISSUES OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFESSION, OR WHAT DOES BACK TO THE BASICS MEAN TO US?

By Helen P. Warriner

for the Kansas Foreign Language Association
March 31, 1978

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Thank you for inviting me to Wichita. I am happy to be here, for I have never visited your state before. I am grateful, also, for the opportunity to speak to you, for I find that the requirement to prepare a speech forces me to synthesize my thinking at a given point in time regarding the teaching of languages. This particular speech reviewing critical issues in the profession and offering my response to the question of basics is not new thinking; it is an updating of my beliefs and concerns as of March, 1978, and I drew heavily from my experience of the last several years in developing it. It is new, however, for you. I enjoyed doing it, and I hope that I will come across more effectively than the city preacher who went to the little country church to fill in for the vacationing minister one Sunday. He opened the service with a lot of preliminaries, some of which those good country folk were not used to. Then his sermon went on and on interminably. When he was about an hour into it, he noticed one of the older men in the back of the church take a pistol out of his bib overalls and lay it across his lap as he looked menacingly at the city preacher, so he hastily brought his message to a close. As he was at the front door greeting the congregation at the end of the service, the fellow with the pistol came by, and the preacher said nervously, "Say, brother, I hope you didn't get that pistol out with me in mind." "Nope," the man replied, "but I sure as hell better not catch sight of the fellow that recommended you."

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And I imagine that you have heard about Sister Placid who joined an order in which the sisters had to take a vow of silence. The condition of the vow was that they could only speak two words every five years. Sister Placid went assiduously about her studies for the first five years and came before the

Mother Superior. When it was her time to speak, she thought studiously and said, "Bad food." It was rather obvious that that didn't please the Mother Superior, but she didn't say anything. Five years passed, and again Sister Placid came before the Mother Superior. That time she didn't deliberate as long before she spoke her two words, "Hard bed." Another five years passed, and the third time she appeared before the Mother Superior. This time she didn't hesitate a moment. She immediately blurted out, "I quit," to which the Mother Superior, exasperated by now with Sister Placid, responded, "It's about time. You've done nothing but complain ever since you've been here."

I don't know that I will be a speaker of such a few words, but I will try to make my remarks to the point and of interest to you so that you will not feel about me like the Mother Superior did about Sister Placid.

I incorporated the phrase "Back to the Basics" into my speech title, partially as a kind of come-on and partially because during recent months I have been asking myself and discussing with colleagues some questions very fundamental to our profession. I am not going to discuss back-to-the-basics in the common frame of reference in which it gets debated on educators' programs and makes headlines in newspapers today. I want to deal with some of the issues that I feel are <u>basic to us</u> in the foreign language profession and that deserve our serious attention and consideration.

Number one is that we are kidding ourselves if we think that we are very successful in teaching language in the time that we allow ourselves, that is, all of the grammar in two years if in a high school program and within one year at the college level. The consequences are numerous and serious.

Go back to the early 1960's with me. In those post-Sputnik days, we decided that we had better catch up with the Russians verbally as well as technologically, so we added two skills--listening and speaking--to our long-espoused objectives, reading and writing. We realized that we also ought to know more about the other peoples of the world, so we expanded, intensified, and changed the teaching of culture. So far, so good. These were long

overdue changes, if they were precipitated by the Russians and the wrong motives. But where we went awry, I more and more realize, is that we expected teachers to cover the previous course, curriculum, or whatever you want to call it--that is, from "¿Qué es el burro?" through the past subjunctive by June of level two--and teach the kids to speak the language as well. (Please bear with me as I use comfortable secondary school illustrations and translate them into your own sequence as appropriate if you are a college listener. Just last fall at the Southern Conference, I met a university instructor involuntarily responsible for a crash course in which all of the grammar of French is taught in one quarter. The problem is yours too, my university friends.) Back to the issue. In the early sixties we doubled or perhaps more than doubled our objectives without allowing ourselves more time to get the job done. Oh yes, some of us in the high schools advocated spreading the first two levels over at least three years, but the texts didn't change to make such an adjustment very feasible. To my knowledge, the college people didn't do that much to cope with the problem. The result is that we now have more diversity of coverage than ever and articulation problems have increased. Some of us don't finish the second-year book until well in the th[illegible] year. Others convert the second year into what Beverly Enwall, the foreign language supervisor in South Carolina, calls "the verb year" and succeed breathlessly in getting through the past subjunctive by the end of level two. And you, college friends, get our students with whatever amount and quality of coverage. There is no definition of level one or level two in practice in the high schools. My own experience and two surveys which I have done reveal the following problems, to name only a few, which beset us at the secondary level. One of the surveys was of my supervisor colleagues throughout the country. Almost all of them responded. The other was of 100 foreign language teachers in Virginia, 63 of whom answered.

1. Articulation. Teachers cope with the challenges of too much material in various ways. Some make major adaptations, such as using two books over a three-year period. I estimate that half of the teachers actually do this. Others go only as far as they can, leaving out much of the material and making the best of the dilemma at the beginning of the next school year. Students move from one teacher or one school to another or go on to enter college programs with not only an unknown quantity of coverage, but also of quality. I believe that articulation problems are far worse now than they were two decades ago, primarily as a result of the increased diversity of practices regarding coverage.
2. Learning Effects. When the pace is not slowed, learning becomes superficial. Students are exposed to material without having the time either to understand or develop proficiency in it. If they go so far as to drop out, they are not with us to be taught. Furthermore, teachers recognize that they should work more frequently with culture than they have time for, and they have been encouraged to diversify instructional activities to make learning more effective, yet they often have to sacrifice these desirable, even essential activities, to "get through the book."
3. Morale. Teacher morale is affected by the lack of realism concerning what they are supposed to cover, the pressures they feel to "finish the book," and the physical and mental demands placed upon them when adjustments are made and their work is increased by the need to develop handouts, attend

added curricular meetings, etc. Nor do students or parents understand when students continue using the first-year book in the second year. À la catch 22, if adjustments are not made, the student experiences pressure and morale problems of a different sort.

4. Dropouts. Students often become so discouraged when they experience large gaps in the sequencing of instruction or are required to repeat large blocks of material that they drop out. Some teachers think that the articulation problems, which are perhaps somewhat synonymous with the textbook problems, are a major contribution to the high percentage of dropouts we are currently experiencing.
5. Expense. In instances in which two levels are spread over three years, additional books have to be purchased for the overlap time. Textbook acquisition, however financed, nearly doubles, and this requires money that could much more productively be invested in other scholastic applications.
6. The Role of the Teacher. Teachers cannot do what many realize they should; they cannot be creative. They are too busy rewriting the curriculum, adapting materials, doing handouts, meeting to make adjustments, and just coping. They become slaves to texts, even when they recognize the problem and do not wish to do so.
7. The Special Dilemma of the Small School District. Some of the teachers and supervisor respondents suggested that texthooks cannot be perfect and that local adaptations always need to be made. I agree with that generalization, but

I also recognize that large school districts with supervisory assistance or large numbers of teachers have the human and financial resources to make the adaptations needed whereas the small ones often do not. The majority of our teachers are in school districts that have fewer than ten foreign language instructors. They often do not have enough professional voice to get administrators to honor their requests for change. It is therefore not possible for many teachers to make the adjustments that they know need to be made.

What I have presented is not just my own theory. The two surveys which I did, a similar one in Louisiana, and the pursuit of the topic with teachers in a half dozen or more workshop occasions contributed to the above viewpoints. Furthermore, I had a session at ACTFL in San Francisco last fall on the thesis, "there is too much between the covers to cover." Invariably and almost without exception, everyone acknowledges that there is a problem. Not only that, but teachers seem almost grateful to the point of relief that someone is trying to tackle the problem. My job is not yet done. The panelists and I who led the ACTFL session are currently preparing point-of-view statements for ANNALS which will appear in the early fall. We hope to provide a response card that readers can mail in to let us know how they feel. If the consensus continues to manifest itself, some of us are thinking that a national blue-ribbon task force might be consituted to draw up a proposal for change that would guide publishers and authors in the more reasonable preparation of texts. Let me say in postscript that I do not blame them for the dilemma. They market what sells. If we tell them, with concerted voice, that we want a more reasonable pacing of material, they will give it to us. Hopefully we will

bring about change, and if we do, it will be much easier for teachers to do a more thorough job of teaching the four skills and culture.

Issue number two is leadership or the need for it. Fifteen years ago, we were just at the beginning of a revolution that had the potential for greater impact upon foreign language learning in the United States than anything that had ever happened within our profession. Few of us have thoroughly evaluated that revolution, I believe. It was a bi-faceted one. On the one hand, it was a revolution moving us from teaching reading and writing to four skills--reading, writing, listening, and speaking--and with a different treatment of culture. On the other, it was a revolution of methodolgy that had to accompany the revolution in philosophy to make the achievement of the increased objectives possible. In the philosophical realm, it was resoundingly successful, I would say. Almost no one today disagrees with the four-skill philosophy. We introduce every curriculum guide with it. We plan our workshops and title our books with some aspect of it. We really believe it. If, however, the revolution succeeded philosophically, methodologically the results were very different. We changed the textbooks so vastly, and sometimes so naively, although not quantitatively, that we could hardly recognize them as language books any more. NDFA institutes appeared all over the country to help us learn to orchestrate pattern drills and cope with minimal pairs. The administrators bought us language labs with features that the neighboring schools' labs didn't have, and we went abroad to learn the language that we really didn't know very well but had been teaching for however-many years. But to every action there is a reaction. To every left stroke of the pendulum, there is a right stroke. To every revolution there is a counter-revolution. It was hard to teach by those funny, new textbooks. It was not easy to sell books that teachers didn't know how to use. And it takes years to change the college curriculum, so we never got around to revamping teacher preparation. And how was one to follow a Nelson Brooks, a William Riley Parker, or a Wilga Rivers at the

podium and attract attention without taking issue with what they had said? So, we learned to argue. We disparaged our leaders for getting too far ahead of us when maybe we were not trying hard enough to catch up with them. The publishers now began to offer us books that incorporated the "best of the audio-lingual and traditional approaches" and that mixed philosophies and even methodology about as successfully as oil and water blend, and we bought them. And then came the era of eclecticism, supposedly embracing any methods that led to the achievement of the goals, but which, if we really want to be honest about it, resulted in an excuse for slipping back into the comfortable routine of teachers talking, often analytically, students listening, and texts occupying the constant attention of both. What were the speakers and the writers--the leaders of the profession--to headline their articles and title their speeches with now? Who would listen if they all agreed? It's hard to tell funny stories or get people excited about eclecticism. Ahhh--specialization--that had to be the answer! This is the age of specialization. Why not foreign languages, too? So we got such things as individualization, humanization, interdisciplinary instruction, career education, and communicative competence. We accumulated so many choices that in recent years we have been reading articles and having workshops on "choosing among the options." Furthermore, not everyone could individualize, do career education, or be interdisciplinary, at least not as they read and heard that they should, and many of us developed professional guilt complexes or became lonesomely disaffected because no one was talking to us.

I maintain that many of our leaders have not provided the direction that the foreign language profession needs and deserves.

I think that teachers are weary of being asked each time they pick up a professional journal or go to a meeting to revamp their curriculum or their methodology to accommodate the latest new "thing." I think that in our fervor to innovate, we have encouraged, maybe inadvertently, the trading off of four-skill instruction for aspects of language teaching, specialized interests, or specific techniques. Means have become ends.

I call upon us now to address ourselves to putting perspective back into foreign language programs. By no means am I saying that we must discard the options and innovations, but I am urging us to insist, first and foremost, on classrooms in which the students are active participants, yes, Latin students, too, speaking the target language, much of the time. If the options and innovations assist in achieving this, well and good, but let's make sure that we use them so that they do indeed contribute.

There is nothing that will assist us in getting back on target better than some of the excellent theory that appeared during the early sixties. I hear people scoff at Nelson Brooks, and I cringe because I believe that he and his generation of writers provided theory and methodology for us that are unsurpassed in potential impact on foreign language teaching. Go back and review Wilga River's four assumptions in The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher. Excellent guidance is there for the asking. Dialogues and adaptations and pattern drills and other good audio-lingual activities can be combined by skillful and artful teachers to create exciting foreign language classrooms. We allowed the inept who made their use a dull, boring, mind-numbing process to propagandize the profession with ignorance and cynicism. We never changed the preparation of teachers to ready them for four-skill teaching. So we abandoned the effort before we were even ready to try it.

I believe that we are going to see more temperance in the future in what our leaders ask of us. The "issues" sessions at ACTFL have been well attended by people who were eager to speak their minds on some of our basic questions, and conference programs are now beginning to exhibit more reason in the nature of session topics.

The third issue which I would like to review today I shall state in the form of a question, "Do we know what good teaching is?" Rhetorically, I propose that we do. This issue is related to the leadership problem which I just reviewed.

I have come by experience to want to see one particular characteristic when I go into the classroom. I want to see the students actively involved using the target language orally. I have observed that if they can speak, they can handle the other three skills well also. On the other hand, if they cannot speak, they are usually very mediocre in their control of listening, reading, and writing. Latin fits into this pattern, as well as the modern languages, although the oral usage is of a different nature and for different purposes. The pleasure and satisfaction of students who are actively involved are usually gratifyingly obvious.

What I just suggested should be comforting to many teachers. Some of us have developed mild or maybe not-so-mild guilt complexes because we tried using LAP's and gave them up or because we are not specialists in career education. Without attempting to discredit these movements or any other development that contributes to good foreign language instruction, my primary request is a simple one: just get those students involved in good four-skill instruction--with speaking as the predominant activity.

Good teaching is not necessarily newsworthy. In fact, most really exciting classes that I see would be very difficult to write up into an article for ANNALS. The good teacher individualizes, uses the overhead projector and all of those other devices advocated in workshops, incorporates career education, and is a humanist. The good teacher doesn't make

an issue out of the ordinary, the obvious, the necessary; they are just second-nature, a part of the job.

The text is not omni-present and ever-open in a good foreign language class. It might be a very directive guide for the teacher and class, but its presence in any form, including homework or class exercises, is subtle and disguised. Students and teacher communicate orally, hardly realizing that the text is being used. Learning is applied, relevant, and natural. Language becomes a means of communication between teacher and students without the psychological barrier that the physical presence of the book creates.

In summary of this issue, I just want to see your students speaking French and using Latin. That's what good learning is. Good teaching makes it happen. The good teacher is the one who does ordinary things extraordinarily well.

A fourth issue which I would like us to examine today is the disorganized nature of our profession. We are one of the smaller disciplines in numbers of teachers, yet we have more organizations than any of the others. We are fractionalized, segmented and disjointed. We are parochial, provincial and chauvinistic. Let's review. Each language is represented by a language specific group. In my state there are seven such state chapters, and then there are the nationals. Each state has a comprehensive association encompassing teachers of all languages. There is ACTFL at the national level. The Modern Language Association is yet another foreign language organization. An then, many teachers subscribe to the Modern Language Journal and think they belong to an organization. It's quite a challenge for the teacher to recognize all of these groups and to know what the structure of the profession is.

The consequences of this fractionalization are serious. The financial resources of the profession are dissipated among the several groups,

making our foreign language professional overhead extremely high. Human resources and energy are not sufficiently concentrated to cause maximum impact. Identity with the profession as a whole is practically impossible, for we have an alphabet soup of organizations. I find that teachers who feel a responsibility to belong to a professional organization often are not well enough informed to make intelligent choices. Furthermore, think what happens to our identity outside of the foreign language profession. Principals know that NCTM represents math; NCSS, the social studies; NCTE, English, et cetera, but they don't know what to ascribe to us. What does this do to our image? What does this say about the foreign language profession?

We have a plethora of organizations with too many budgets, too many bulletins, too many officers, and too many journals.

A related issue is that of the strength of the state constituent organizations--the state foreign language associations--and of their relationship to ACTFL. My recent work as Membership Chairperson for ACTFL and appearances that I have made on programs of these groups on several occasions have confirmed my belief that the state organizations are not nearly as effective as they should be. Membership is low in many instances. It is sometimes almost impossible to find out who the officers of state associations are. Programs are often poorly planned and advertised, and attendance at meetings is low. Some of the boards remain almost static, with the same individuals rotating through the offices, rarely encouraging the infusion of new blood. Some organizations are almost exclusively high school oriented while others are dominated by college instructors. The immediately obvious consequence of all of these conditions is that too many of the state organizations contribute little to the advancement of foreign language programs or profession within their jurisdiction.

What can you, an individual, do about this? I offer two suggestions. If you are not a member of ACTFL, join. It is the one organization that ties us all together, no matter what level or language. It is the one organization that is more concerned about the future of foreign language education than on where we have been. And I learned while a Council officer that it is the one organization that people look to when they want a job done. ACTFL is a young organization, and it needs more members to become even more effective in its leadership role. It needs you, every one of you. The second recommendation is that you work to strengthen your own state organization. Join. Attend. Bring a friend. Help with the program. Examine what the Ohio and Connecticut groups have done to revolutionize themselves into organizations with quadrupled memberships and attractive and comprehensive programs and see what you can learn from them to apply in Kansas.

Well, I have come to the end of my basics, at least of those that I consider of primary concern. I have said that we must be more reasonable in pacing the introduction of the grammatical corpus of a language if we are to make it possible for more students to learn languages more effectively. I have said that we do know what good teaching is and that we must put into perspective the specialized aspects of teaching that tend to divert us from what our basic efforts should be. I have recognized the need for more directive leadership than has been evident in recent years. I have advocated cohesiveness and professional unity and the strengthing of the organizations that represent us.

I hope that I have struck at least one familiar chord with you. I also hope that I have made myself clear. I would not want you to go away with a misconstruction of what I have said, like the Japanese businessman who got the wrong impression of our holiday system in this country. Four executives of the Mitsubashi Electronics Company came to the United States to expand the marketing system for their products, and they were here for almost a

year. When they returned home they became engaged one day in a conversation with their colleagues in the office building about some of their experiences here, and the subject of holidays came up. Mr. Yoshimura said that his favorite holiday was Easter, and he went on to describe it.

"It falls in winter," he said "and people cut evergreen trees which they bring into their homes and decorate. They light candles and sing carols and give each other presents and everybody is happy and kind to each other."

"No, no, you are all wrong," his friend Mr. Toshiba interrupted. "Easter is in the fall when the leaves are turning, and people give thanks for their blessings of the year and have big feast of celebration."

And then Mr. Namasaki spoke up and corrected Mr. Toshiba. "Easter was my favorite holiday, too, but it's a day in summer when families have picnics and go to the beaches and at night they put on beautiful fireworks displays. Easter is the day when the Americans commemorate the independence of their nation. It's a very patriotic occasion."

Well, Mr. Onomoto couldn't wait to get into the discussion. "Why, how could all three of you have become so confused. Easter is in the early spring when the people have had enough of winter and cold weather. It seems that centuries ago there was a great man who lived on earth who was very much loved by the people and he became their master. But you know how it is, there were some who didn't like him, and they accused him of all kinds of ill deeds which he didn't commit, but they put him to death anyway. His friends took his body and buried it in a tomb with a large stone over the opening, and now, at the beginning of spring, the great master pushes back the stone and comes out. And if the sun is shining and he sees his shadow he goes back into his resting place, for he knows that there will be at least six more weeks of bad weather."